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ENGLISH COMPOSITION AS A MODE OF BEHAVIOR

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The almost universal practice of teaching composition by pointing out to the writer the errors in his themes seems not likely soon to be superseded. Whatever crimes may be committed in its name, it keeps its place in virtue of two incontestable facts: first, it has been the prevailing method for 2000 years and more, and second, no other method has been as yet invented that will in practice take its place.

Nevertheless I have always held the view, and have frequently expressed it, that a large part of the theme-correcting of which we hear so much complaint, is probably wasted. Not that it fails to secure an immediate reduction of the percentage of error, but that it fails to reach the inward disease of which the errors are merely the outlying and obvious symptoms. If the source of this disorder could be discovered, if even a fraction of the arduous (and not very remunerative) labor of theme-reading could be spent in eradicating it, the symptoms would soon disappear of themselves and the readers of themes could doff their prison garb and become as other men.

Let us, then, for a little time inquire into the primal causes of what we know as errors in student English. Our inquiry is made the easier by the fact, apparent in even a superficial survey, that student English, or at least Freshman English, has come to be virtually the same in all American colleges and universities.

Thus the number of students enrolled in the classes is, proportionately to the total number, approximately the same. The proportion of instructors to the number of students is also approximately the same. If the methods of teaching vary, they vary within narrow limits, and whatever is originated in one institution is promptly adopted, or at least tested, in all the others.

The proficiency in the vernacular of the students in the various colleges is also astonishingly similar. The same verbal confusions, the same faults of construction, the same violations of taste and syntax, are common to them all and in about the same proportion. So uniform is the run, that if a thousand papers by a hundred students in each of ten leading universities were put before an impartial judge, I venture to say that judging solely by merit he could not assign any but the smallest fraction of them to the institutions at which they were written.

It is possible, therefore, to draw from a set of themes composed at any one of our colleges or universities, conclusions that will be true of all the rest.

Taking the question in the large, then, the main causes of bad English in our schools and colleges are, in my opinion, three in number. Of these, one is perfectly obvious. I mean the influence of spoken foreign languages. In our impatience with the bad English of our students, we forget that much of it comes out of the melting-pot. It is well to remember that more than twelve millions of our fellow-Americans, registered and unregistered, were born in countries where English is not the native language and have for their home speech a foreign tongue. The sons and daughters of these foreign-born number at least thirteen millions more. It thus appears that there are in this country twenty-five millions of persons whose speech is either unqualifiedly foreign or is seriously influenced by the foreign speech of the home and the community.

The results of this condition of affairs may be easily traced. The children from these homes attend the public schools, and a considerable proportion of them finish the high-school course. Of these last anyone who is above a certain minimum of intelligence and aptitude, may, in spite of his defects of speech, find his way into a college or university.

Compare for a moment the language environment of such a student with that of the English boy who is faced toward Oxford or Cambridge. The English boy from his earliest years is immersed in an atmosphere of cultivated speech. If he comes in contact with English of the baser sort, as of course he does, it is from the lips of persons who are felt to be inferior in speech as well as in social

standing. When he goes to Harrow or Eton, he mingles with boys whose home influences are similar to his own. In fine, good English is to him his native language, whereas to millions of American young people English is virtually a foreign language.

It thus comes about naturally that a considerable proportion of the defective English that one meets in student themes is translation English. It is English diverted from its normal course by the attractive or repulsive power of foreign idioms lodged in the writer's mind. Of these influences, some are easily detected, as when a student writes "This was enough to make everybody lift up their ears," or refers to the bystanders in a picture of the Crucifixion as "weeping with opened face." But other aberrations due to this cause are so subtle that they can be appreciated and explained only by a philologist.

This type of error, however, though sufficiently annoying, is, outside of our large cities and certain limited areas, not very common. Furthermore it is a condition that will in course of time correct itself.

The second of the three causes that I shall mention is, on the other hand, much wider in its influence and more difficult to control. I refer to the breaking up of what may be called the family tradition. The family, in years gone by, or the household, was a sort of bulwark against the forces which naturally tend to degrade and brutalize the vernacular. The daily reading of the Scriptures, the earnest admonition of parents, couched frequently in conventional but nevertheless elevated language, the comparative isolation of thousands of homes, the absence of the lighter forms of literature, all these and other influences tended to preserve in the family, in spite of provincialisms and grammatical lapses, a certain tone and choiceness and gravity of speech that are the essential characters of national idiom. In families, whether of the North or the South, that have preserved their integrity and, for one reason or another, limited their intercourse with the community, one may still hear this firm, deliberate speech—the speech of a Kentucky mountaineer or the speech of a Lincoln.

Three agencies have conspired, however, to break through the sheltering walls of the family tradition. They are the newspaper,

especially the Sunday newspaper, the telephone, and the automobile. (To which should perhaps be added the movie, since the American film is said to threaten to corrupt even the speech of Great Britain.) These three agencies have probably done as much to revolutionize American family life, and with it family speech, as any others that can be mentioned. The daily paper, for example, has flung into the American home, with a careless hand, an infinity of cheap reading matter, some of it good, some of it neutral, some of it, like the *Love Affairs of a Lonely Woman*, or *Love and Married Life*, or *Outside the Law*, of the silliest possible character. Together with much that is indispensable to modern civilization the newspaper has brought into the home smartness, slang, sensation, flippancy, and insincerity—qualities that are like poison to the body of our national speech.

As for the telephone and the automobile, it is easy to see how the first with its curt unmannerly summons, has invaded the seclusion of the home, introducing habitually patterns and qualities of speech that hitherto were heard only casually, and inducing a like miscellany on the part of the members of the household; and how by means of the automobile, thousands of persons who in older days rarely went beyond the neighboring farms or the nearest village, now transport themselves at pleasure in an hour's time into the heart of a many-languaged metropolis.

To pretend that all such changes in social relationships are harmful would be absurd, for each probably has its ordained place in the life and progress of the Republic. But their reactions upon the mother-tongue are, to say the least, disconcerting. They operate to confuse the standards of usage, to syncopate the natural rhythms of the language, and to unfit the common speech for the expression of noble feeling and sustained thought. It is the business of the teacher to watch them and wherever their influence is baleful to seek to counteract it.

Although the two causes that have been mentioned will account for a great part of the lapses of taste and idiom that one finds in student themes, there is a deeper-seated, more widely prevailing cause, which, growing out of the nature of language itself and our methods of teaching it, is, I am convinced, the real *fons et origo*.

I mean the clash between, on one hand, the instinctive, inherited impulse to communication, and, on the other hand, the scholastic system of abstract symbolism which, under the name of language studies, grammar, and rhetoric, we now use in the schools and regard as indispensable as a medium of culture.

The impulse to communicate, I need hardly say, is nearly the oldest thing in the history of man. It comes next to the impulse to self-preservation. It is indeed in its origin a phase of the latter, for it is only by the group-activity, which communication makes possible, that man has been able to hold his own against the forces of nature and the assaults of animals. It is, therefore, almost as instinctive and habitual as eating or drinking, laughing or crying, or any of the other reflexes out of which it has developed.

Not only does the instinct to communicate descend to us from the childhood of the race, but it is dominant from the earliest childhood of the individual. In infancy it is indeed the prevailing activity, supplying, next to food, the most urgent craving of the infant mind. It soon becomes a settled habit, with its roots buried deep in the subliminal consciousness.

The language of most children when they come to school, unless they have been abnormally repressed, is adequate to the communication of their needs. It is like the language of the animals from which they are descended. It is a language of gestures, of facial movements, of unpremeditated cries of joy or woe, of swift elliptical sentences in which the order of words is determined by the precedence of the feelings. A large part of it consists of modulations of simple primitive sounds that probably go back to the infancy of the race: *mn*, *hn*, *nh*, *n*, *nh-hn*—expressions that flow spontaneously out of the subconscious tract of the child mind and go home instantly to the minds of his playmates.

This childish language is, therefore, little conscious of itself. It is a mode of behavior like leaping, running, or tossing the arms. Words to a child are wishes, commands, ways of securing what one wants, ways of piecing out gestures. It is a language of vivid sensory reactions. Whatever psychologists may say, for children the word dog can bark, the word knife can cut.

It is, to be sure, a riotous sort of language, formed without conscious effort or control; but it is perhaps not so lawless as it seems, for underneath it, below the threshold of expression, are vague instincts of order and purpose that need only to be cultivated in order to become guiding principles.

When the child enters the school he is possessed, therefore, of two invaluable gifts: an eagerness to communicate and be communicated with, and a vocabulary—if we may stretch the term to include all significant externalizings of himself—sufficient to convey his feelings and ideas to his playmates. He is a complex of rich fundamental instincts and habits ready to respond normally and copiously to any natural stimulus.

And now upon this seething caldron of communicative impulses, the school, as ordinarily conducted, clamps the lid of linguistic ritual. The teacher approaches the pupil as if he were a great emptiness to be filled and a great dumbness to be made vocal. Ignoring or at least undervaluing the gestures and poses and cries and modulations that are the child's natural medium of expression, the teacher proceeds to unload upon him the colossal structure of our speech—one of the most complicated, the most ingenious, the most abstract, the most delicate of all of the creations of human reason. In almost all respects it is at the opposite pole from the language that he is accustomed to in practice. Where one is concrete the other is abstract, where one is synthetic, the other is analytic, where one is spontaneous, the other is reflective, where one is irrational, the other is reasoned, where one is direct and immediate, the other is symbolic. Above all, there is in this new aspect of language that is imposed upon him an effect—or at least a pretense—of unity, symmetry, order, and restraint that was conspicuously absent in the other.

To the employment of such a system, no objection can, of course, be urged. It is indispensable in education of any sort. It is the mode by which culture has always been and always will be acquired and imparted. To attempt to evade it is like attempting to evade death or taxes. The only just ground of complaint is that it is not used in the right way. If it is dissociated from the child's instinctive language, if new habits of speech and speech-control are

set up in this higher plane as if there were no habits in the lower plane already in possession, then it is being used injudiciously and trouble may be expected to follow.

What happens when a new order of practice is sought to be established in a field where deep-seated habits are already operative, is known to everyone. The two orders work at cross-purposes. There are disastrous collisions and derailments. The pupil, at home neither in the old sphere nor in the new, is pulled violently now in one direction now in the other. He is the victim of vague depressions and discouragements, arising from the checking and aborting of the old, familiar impulses.

A child at such a stage often goes through a series of somnambulistic convulsions, as if he were trying to throw off a leaden weight. His whole scholastic life is an effort to escape from what seems to him the body of death. Vacation is welcomed as a happy release, and the thought of being put on the rack again makes him miserable.

I can illustrate this mental state, together with its pains and nervous disorders, from my own experience in acquiring a style, not of composition, but of handwriting. Before I learned to make the letters, I used to amuse myself by pretending to write, filling the slate with curves and up-and-down lines which, however ungraceful, gave me genuine satisfaction. I used to submit them to the older members of the family and was greatly pleased when anyone pretended to read them. But as soon as I went to school, the teacher imposed upon these self-cultivated conditions of hand and eye, a standardized system of penmanship, and from that time on handwriting was to me a disease. During most of my school life I formed every letter with a painful self-consciousness. I was like a patient with the rheumatism trying to find the posture that gives him the fewest twinges. Finally after ten or twelve years of agonized search, I hit by the purest accident upon my present manner of writing, and gained instant relief. Like my earliest attempts, it is illegible to everyone except myself, but I would not part with it for a king's ransom.

It is out of such a state of mind that the English of the student theme proceeds—for the pathological condition is not confined to the

lower grades but continues through the high school and into the college. The maddening errors that students are guilty of—the verbless sentences, the ludicrous malapropisms as for example, “The Chinese are Confusionists in religion”—the unconscious lapses into slang, the sudden plunge from the sublime to the ridiculous—these are not, in any due proportion, the product of stupidity, or malice, or even laziness. They are the outward signs of an inward lesion—of the disjunction of two phases of man’s nature that can work as they should only when they work together.

This is, I am convinced, the prevailing malady of student English. In how many themes may one not note the unavailing effort of the student to find an outlet for his restless thought,

As on a dull day in an ocean cave
The blind wave feels round his long sea hall.

Unable to launch his message such as it is, either in the natural, free-and-easy style of ungirt speech, or in the strictly ordered march of a logical development, he devises a kind of scrambled language of his own, compounded of trite phrases and mangled idioms, which is neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring. “I was brought up,” writes one student, “in an English spoken home, and have always lived in a neighborhood of the same and have had the influence of speaking English.” And another writes: “In beginning my career in the study of English, sufficient influence was present to help me in conquering of the subject.” And still another treating of the same question: “Nothing is more free and easier of learning than the smooth and exact knowledge of English.” Nor need we confine ourselves to student English. The following is from the letterhead of a school system in a Western city: “Our High School’s Aim: A democratized program of studies for each student pursued amid a socialized environment with content of each subject vitalized with vocational functioning.”

If the disorders that I have described are due to dissociation, the remedy lies in bringing the dissociated things together, that is, (1) in finding in the impulse to untrammelled communication, in spite of its seeming waywardness, the vague beginnings of a sense for unity, for symmetry, for restraint, for proportion, and attaching

to these vague feelings the simplest aspects of the symbolic apparatus; and (2) in introducing into the symbolic apparatus the ideas of sociability and quick communication belonging to the other phase, of which it is now usually devoid.

How, in detail and in practice, this integration may be brought about I do not presume to say. I have tried only to make a diagnosis. It is for others to decide whether this diagnosis is accurate, and if so, what is the proper course of treatment.

The principles that have been advanced may, however, serve as a touchstone in estimating the value of certain ideas about the teaching of composition that have recently been brought forward. I will touch briefly upon two—the composition scale and the method of the French *lycée*.

My chief objection to the exploitation of the so-called composition scale—which I understand perfectly well was originally intended to be used only in order to stabilize the theme-corrector's ratings—is that it cultivates a wrong attitude on the teacher's part. In its preoccupation with symptoms, it diverts attention from the disease. It seems to imply that if all teachers could be trained to assign to a given theme approximately the same numerical value, the problem of composition teaching would be much nearer a solution. This is, I am sure, a vain hope. The scale is merely a clinical thermometer. It registers a symptom; it does not apply a remedy. It is, of course, important that all clinical thermometers should register precisely the same temperature, and a defective thermometer may be fatal in a given case. But to believe that increased uniformity in thermometers will isolate the bacillus, or build up the patient's strength, is manifestly to turn one's back on the principles of rational therapeutics.

Much has been said of late about the methods of teaching composition that prevail in the French *lycée*. It has been proposed by some to import into this country the leading features of the French system which works so well in France. It has been suggested that this system, if it were generally adopted, might replace the classical discipline in its work of implanting in the student's mind an admiration for the virtues of unity, balance, reserve, accuracy, and the like.

I must confess to a strong inclination toward this idea. In fact as long ago as 1894 I translated a lecture by Gustave Allais entitled "Esquisse d'une Méthode Générale de Préparation et d'Explication des Auteurs Français," and made some use of it in my classes. It worked well. Indeed it worked so well as to arouse my suspicions, and I dropped it. I came to the conclusion that a system so admirably adapted to the French mind and language and traditions, cannot, without sweeping modifications, be safely introduced into American classes. With its emphasis upon sharpness of outline, logic, precision, order, and the like, it tends, unless it is used with tact, to accentuate the discrepancy between the impulsive and the rational aspects of language to which I have called attention. Though we have much to learn from the French, the genius of their language is as different from ours as is chalk from cheese. French, to American taste, seems a little hard and frequently a little mincing. In its most serious and dignified passages there is, to American susceptibilities, a rhetorical resonance, a suggestion of legerdemain, that leaves us a little cold. For this reason, neither French poetry nor French prose seems entirely adequate to the expression of the profoundest poetical or reflective thought. At any rate I have never read any French translation of Homer that suggested the surge and thunder of the *Odyssey*, nor any translation of Aeschylus or Sophocles that echoed the leaden march of Fate. Even the French Bible, if I may be perfectly frank, always strikes me as being at best a translation that is eminently polite.

But why should I say these things when they have been said even more uncompromisingly by a master of French style? Listen to the following from the Preface of Renan's *Future of Science*:

The clearness and tact exacted by the French, which, I am bound to confess, compel one to say only part of what one thinks and are damaging to depth of thought, seemed to me so much tyranny. The French care only to express that which is clear. As it happens, the most important truths, those that relate to the transformations of life, are not clear; one only perceives them in a kind of half-light. That is why, after having been the first to perceive the truth of what is called Darwinism nowadays, France has been the last to rally to it. They saw it well enough, but it was out of the beaten track of the lan-

guage, it did not fit the mold of well-constructed phrases. In that way France passed by the side of precious truths, not without seeing them, but simply flinging them among the waste paper as useless or impossible to express.

Lest it may be thought that I am saying these things or making this quotation in derogation of the French language and literature, I hasten to add that I have the highest regard for both, having drawn from them some of my best-remembered pleasures and profits. So great is their wealth that, take away as much as you can, there still remain great riches, quite enough for the greediest.